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The Coen Brothers: Auteurs in the 21st Century

by Max Hermann

(English 1135)

In many ways, the Coen brothers are true modern day auteurs. From pre-production, through shooting, to post-production they are in total control of their films. Beginning with their first film, *Blood Simple*, all the way to the more recent, *No Country For Old Men* and *A Serious Man*, the Coens have stayed true to themselves and done things their way. Overall, it is fairly easy to spot their unique fingerprints and ways of doing things on each of their films.

All films must begin with a story. For the Coen brothers this is usually an original creation of their own. *No Country For Old Men*, originally a Cormac McCarthy novel, is the only one of the three films used for this assignment not to be an original story. After the story is settled on, it starts to materialize in the form of a screenplay. For every film that the Coens have made, adapted or original, Joel and Ethan have written the script. The story in their films usually starts out with an average Joe who gets involved in a complex scheme that appears to be simple at first, but, in all reality, is totally beyond them. The character of The Dude refers to this in *The Big Lebowski* when he says, "There's a lot of in's, a lot of out's, a lot of what-have-you's and, a lot of strands to keep in my head."

Once the plan is put into motion, something usually goes very wrong early and everything begins to unravel. The main characters then get in way over their heads and this leads to a problematic chain of events. Death and murder are a big factor in the rising action of their films. These events are most often the by product of a misunderstanding of what's going on between the main characters. The whole time, we, the viewer know more than the characters involved do. In this misunderstanding, those close to the main characters who had no intention of becoming involved, end up doing so. At the end there is usually a big dramatic climax with a showdown between the main characters, as was the case in *No Country For Old Men* and *Blood Simple*. After this, there is a short or subtle dénouement, where the viewer is left to his or her own devices and things aren't always wrapped up in a nice little package. This was the case, for example, in *No Country For Old Men*.

After the script is finalized, the next step is for a producer to come up with the money necessary to fund the project. Being the self-reliant duo that they are, the Coens are typically the producers of their own films. This ensures that they won't have any big Hollywood producer telling them what to do and controlling their movie. The only downside to this is that they usually have less money to work with than many of their contemporaries. With less money, though, the Coen brothers are able to accomplish quite a lot. This can be attributed to their extensive use of storyboards. By using storyboards, the brothers go into shooting with a fairly strong notion of how their film is going to look. This allows them to keep things on schedule and within the budget, by not wasting time or money while shooting.

During the process of filming a movie, the Coens have often worked with the same crews throughout their entire career. In particular, when it comes to shooting the film, they have only ever worked with three different cinematographers over a twenty-five year span. For *Blood Simple*, they worked with cinematographer Barry Sonnenfeld, and have since moved on to work with Roger Deakins on a number of their more recent films, including *The Big Lebowski* and *No Country For Old Men*. No matter what cinematographer they have worked with, the Coens have always found a way to use clever camera angles to play with the audience. One memorable example of this is during

a scene in *Blood Simple*, when the main female character sits up in bed during the middle of the night at her boyfriend's home. When she lays back down the automobile of the private investigator hired by her husband is revealed to have arrived just outside of the window. The Coens use smart camera angles like this as a way to keep their audiences involved in a constant back and forth game of revealing and concealing information.

When a film is done shooting, the time comes for editing. Throughout the editing process, the editor must piece together a coherent movie by going through hours and hours of shots provided by the director. The Coens assume the role as editors for their films, under the alias Roderick Jaynes. As editors, the Coens have used some distinctive editing techniques throughout their career; the most notable being hidden or disguised cuts. They tend to try and make a cut unnoticeable in order to play with the viewer's head a bit. A hidden or disguised cut can be done in two ways, either visually or audibly. In *Blood Simple*, it is done visually through a sequence when they zoom in on a ceiling fan in one character's room and then pan down and we realize that we are now in a different character's room, as they had cut to a close up of the ceiling fan in the different room. A disguised audio transition is used a number of times in *The Big Lebowski*. During a scene in the film, the song that is playing during a dream sequence (Bob Dylan's "The Man in Me") is revealed to be the song that the character is listening to on his cassette player in real life. Another example of this from the same movie, is when the song being played during the opening title sequence ("Tumbling Tumbleweeds" by Sons of the Pioneers) merges seamlessly into the music being played over the loud speaker in the supermarket.

Technical aspects aside, another thing that makes the Coen brothers stand out as auteurs is their use of similar motifs from film to film. The effect that money has on people, usually negative, is a common motif that has played a key role in many of their films. This can be the lack thereof and the subsequent pursuit of it. It can also happen, as it did in *No Country For Old Men*, when the main character stumbles across a drug deal gone terribly wrong and finds a large amount of cash. Virtually everyone that comes into contact or becomes involved with the money in *No Country For Old Men* meets an early demise. In reality, the only person that really doesn't care about the money is the ruthless, somewhat deranged middleman hired to recover the missing money.

Violence, death, and murder are usually common motifs present within their films as well. In *No Country For Old Men*, the previously mentioned middleman, Anton Chigurh, kills almost every single person that stands in his way, or, as they put it in the film, "inconveniences him." In a way, this is a statement by the Coen brothers that evil is unstoppable and that death is unavoidable, as it awaits everyone. The protagonist cannot even escape death's grip. This does not mean that all hope should be lost, however. In one scene from *No Country For Old Men*, Chigurh and Tommy Lee Jones' character, Sheriff Bell are together in the same motel room. Chigurh had the opportunity to kill the sheriff, but he didn't take it. Why? Perhaps it was that Chigurh had finally met his match, someone who possessed an amount of goodness that equaled or exceeded his level of evilness. The point being that evil will always exist and prevail, unless it is met and/or counteracted with a greater amount of opposite force.

Distinctive American settings play an important role in almost all the films by the Coens. In *Blood Simple* and *No Country For Old Men* the main setting is small town, rural Texas. In both cases things seem to be very simple and straightforward, but beyond the surface something much more sinister and complex is taking place. This goes back to the old Hitchcock idea of "malice in familiar settings". By placing these stories in everyday settings that we are all accustomed to, it makes subjects such as murder and deceit more emotionally jarring. It also questions how well we can really ever know our surroundings and the people around us.

Throughout their career, the Coen brothers have always possessed a distinctive style in their directing. From the technical aspects to subject matter, the Coens have remained consistent. It is hard to find any other filmmakers working in the film industry today with as much control over their

films or that deserve the title of auteurs any more than the Coen brothers do.

Works Cited

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